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The nose knows

BY DAVE BARRY

(This classic Dave Barry column was originally published on May 5, 1998.)

Of all the human senses -- sight, hearing, touch, taste, and the feeling that a huge man with a barbecue fork is lurking in the closet -- perhaps the least appreciated, yet most important, is our sense of smell.

How does our sense of smell work? The simplest way to explain it without doing any research is as follows: Every living thing -- animals, plants, cheese, magazine advertisements, etc. -- is constantly giving off tiny invisible pieces of itself, which scientists call "smell particles." Suppose that you have just entered a room that contains a fudge brownie. As you approach the brownie, your nose snorks up smell particles from it and passes them along into the Olfactory Canal, which was completed in 1825 and goes to Albany, N.Y.

No, sorry, wrong canal. The Olfactory Canal takes the particles to your brain, which is actually a fabulously complex computer, which means that on Jan. 1, 2000, it will stop working and your body will flop around like a recently caught perch. But until then, your brain is able to detect the presence of the brownie particles, and, after analyzing them via a subtle electrochemical process involving billions of tiny neural circuits performing highly sophisticated, lightning-fast calculations, produce the following thought: ``Yum!''

Your brain then transmits a signal to your hand, telling it to go ahead and put the brownie into your mouth; almost instantaneously, your hand responds with the signal informing your brain that you ate the brownie several minutes earlier, because your hand and your mouth agreed many years ago that, as far as chocolate is concerned, there is no need to involve your brain.

Thus we see that our sense of smell is not as important as it seemed to be back at the start of this article. In fact, our sense of smell can actually be dangerous, because it stands to reason that if our nose inhales too many particles into our brains, eventually a dense particle wad will form inside us, and our heads will explode, sending compressed brownie chunks hurling outward fast enough to pass through a brick wall. Fortunately, according to a recent study by the American Medical Association, the chances that this will ever happen to you are "less than one in four" provided that ``you do not breathe too much.''

But the question remains: Why do we have a sense of smell in the first place? The answer is that smell once played a vital role in the survival of the human race, back when we were primitive beings who ran around naked. No, I am not talking about the `60s; I am talking about prehistoric times, when primitive men had to hunt for food to feed their families. They'd creep along naked through the underbrush, and every few minutes they would pause to sniff the air for the scent of prey. Of course, since this was nearly a million years before the invention of soap, all they could smell was their own armpits; the

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animals could easily detect them at a range of 35 miles. As a result, the hunters never captured any animal that had not already died of natural causes, although when the hunters brought this animal back to the primitive village, they'd make up a story to impress the women with their bravery and prowess.

"Whew!" they would say. ``You should have seen the ferocious fight this wild animal put up!"

"That wild animal is a rotting squirrel," the women would respond, "and you get it out of this primitive village RIGHT NOW." Men and women are still divided on the issue of smell. Most women are very sensitive to odors, whereas men, largely as a result of smelling their own selves over the eons, have reached the point where they tend not to detect any aroma below the level of a municipal dump. That's certainly the way it is in my household. At least five times per week, my wife and I have the same conversation. She says: "What's that smell?" And I say, "What smell?" And she looks at me as though I am demented and says: ``You can't SMELL that?"

The truth is, there could be a stack of truck tires burning in the living room, and I wouldn't necessarily smell it. Whereas my wife can detect a lone spoiled grape two houses away. When she takes food out of the refrigerator, she always sniffs it, and she immediately discards it if it smells remotely suspicious. I, on the other hand, will cheerfully eat a cold cut that was manufactured during the Aztec empire.

This Male Smelling Deficiency Syndrome, or MSDS, explains why women generally smell pretty good, whereas some men, particularly men who sit next to you on airplanes, smell like the Football Team Laundry Bag From Hell. Perhaps you know somebody who tends to emit B.O. rays, and you have been wondering what is the best way to tell him. The answer is: sensitively.

For example, in 1964, when I was a student at Pleasantville High School, I had a class with a teacher who had a major odor problem, to the point where, when he'd stroll past the rows of desks, which he did often, students would keel over in his wake. Being teenagers, we might have handled this situation in a cruel manner. But instead, one day, as the teacher walked past, a student in the front row, whose name I will not reveal here, sensitively whipped out a can of Right Guard brand deodorant, fired off a brief blast, then quickly hid the can before the teacher turned around. This gesture was so sensitive that many of us thought we would rupture key internal organs from vibrating so hard.

There are many, many more exciting facts I could tell you about the fascinating topic of smell, but unfortunately I have no idea what they are. So I will conclude this discussion with this thought: Keep sniffing! But don't inhale.